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Cross-Cultural Component in Non-Linguistics Students Teaching

Olga A. Obdalova^{a,*}, Elena V. Gulbinskaya^a^a*Tomsk State University, 36, Lenin Ave., Tomsk, 634050, Russia*

Abstract

This case study describes an experimental procedure involving Russian EFL non-linguistics students in acquisition of culture-specific language units by input of authentic spoken situations in American English. The goal is to identify if culture-specific items present any difficulties for Russian students which may bring to miscomprehending native-like communication. This has been done by examining procedures required for successful comprehension. The results of the study have revealed that acquisition of culture specific vocabulary units in the EFL teaching framework to non-linguistics majors is undermined. Based on findings, the authors make suggestions on possible development of procedures and teaching materials applicable in classroom for Russian learners.

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Keywords: Cross-cultural component; EFL teaching; vocabulary acquisition; authentic situations

1. Introduction

Justification for the researchers' interest in investigating the potential of some lexical items to help the EFL non-linguistics students better understand the subtle differences in contextual meanings of words and words strings depending on the ways to convey the meaning rooted in the culture employed within the speech community is based on the internationally accepted principle of teaching a foreign language through enabling meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement (Gural 2014; Safonova, 2014; Nyman, Gural, Smokotin, Bovtenko 2013).

Kecskes argues that formulaic language is the heart and soul of native-like language use. Speech communities have preferred ways of saying things (cf. Wray 2002; Kecskes 2003) and preferred ways of organizing thoughts

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-3822-52-98-96; fax: +7-3822-52-97-42.

E-mail address: O.Obdalova@mail.ru

(Kecskes 2007). Preferred ways of saying things are generally reflected in the use of formulaic language and figurative language while preferred ways of organizing thoughts can be detected through analyzing, for instance, the use of subordinate conjunctions, clauses and discourse markers. Selecting the right words and expressions, and formulating utterances in ways preferred by the native speakers of that language (“native-like selection”) might become more important than syntax. Indeed, there are many components of speech that are important to the language learner, including message form, but message content is crucial in conveying its meaning accurately.

The form of speech is important because it relays the level of formality and suggests the choice of words to be used in the utterance, but more important might appear cultural differences, of which the learners might not be aware. It is important that EFL students be aware about a divide between national communities. We found a vivid example of this cultural difference when conducting this study. In contemporary American English the utterance ‘*Be my guest*’, for example, not only literally invites someone to behave as one’s guest (using one’s house, belongings, etc) but also figuratively tells someone to ‘*feel free to act as he or she pleases*’ (Ammer, *The American Heritage*), while a lot of EFL Russian students understood it as ‘*byd’ kak doma*’, that is they relied on the meaning suggested by the words – ‘*enjoy my hospitality*’. That is why it is necessary to include into the teaching framework the aspects of appropriateness of speech utterances in the context in the light of contemporary use and sociocultural nuances.

Formulaic language helps Russian students better understand not only the English language but also the underlying knowledge structures that are different from their own. This case study will help investigators and language teachers identify the reasons of difficulties for Russian students in comprehending and using formulaic language.

2. Methodology

This case study is an integral part of a larger research project under supervision of professor Dr. Kecskes (State University of New-York, USA) within the activity of Laboratory of Sociocultural Linguistics and Teaching Foreign Discourse (head professor Dr. S. K. Gural) undertaken at National Research Tomsk State University. It is an experimental procedure involving Russian EFL non-linguistics students in acquisition of culture-specific language units by input of authentic spoken situations in American English.

It is a short-term investigation aimed at exploring the compliance of the learning environment for the target group of learners with the goals of EFL teaching in Russian universities and the demands of the modern multicultural society and globalized professional communication and the need for improvement of content of teaching for the target group of learners in order to enhance the knowledge of Russian students in acquiring and using English. The researchers were interested in finding out that if students do not have background knowledge on specific language units carrying authenticity of communication in the target language, they may not be able to comprehend the meaning of the whole communicative situation, committing pragmatic mistakes. The authors assumed that teaching may benefit if emphasis is placed on including into vocabulary learning and practice situation-bound utterances (SBUs) as culture-specific units. So, that teaching should focus on providing students with not only knowledge of linguistic and grammar forms and functions of the language but also with specific knowledge and linguistic experience required for comprehending conventional connotation of culture-specific expressions.

The methodology of the study is based on the main principles of pragmalinguistics, socio-pragmatics and intercultural pragmatics, which determine the choice of research methods. The research instruments include language proficiency test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise) to identify students’ EFL competence, presentation of authentic language samples, and discourse comprehension tasks.

2.1. Learning environment and subjects

The case study describes the experimental procedures done within the learning environment where English is used only as a medium of instruction. Particularly, at the university level in which learners are pursuing the Bachelor’s degree majoring in science and non-linguistic disciplines.

The focus group included 15 science faculty students from Tomsk State University. 10 of them take their second year EFL course at the Faculty of Physics and have regular classes of English only once a week. 5 of subjects study at the Faculty of Applied Mathematics and Cybernetics and have English classes twice a week. According to the results of a placement test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise), all the students have pre-intermediate or

intermediate level of English, specified as a minimal proficiency level required for the participation in the research project. The subjects' intermediate level of English use shows that they are not highly experienced users of English, but have enough knowledge and skills to deal with basics of English. This level guarantees that the participants are experienced in general English and their audibility of academic context is high enough to engage them in teaching and interaction.

2.2. Research questions

The objective of this case study was to find out how Russian EFL non-linguistics university students whose proficiency allows them to practically use English as a means of communication can deal with culture-specific lexical items and situations. Within the frames of this study we would like to get the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) *What types of formulaic language carry most socio-cultural difficulty for the learners?*
- 2) *How teaching of SBUs can contribute to the students' sociocultural awareness growth?*

2.3. Research Design

There were two stages in the undertaken research: preparatory and experimental. The preparatory stage aimed at selection of language units for input, design of teaching materials and experimental procedures, and learners' familiarization with the target language items, subjects' engagement into practice exercises and pre-experimental training task. The selection of relevant formulaic language units was done with the help of dictionaries, Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (www.american corpus.org), and consultations with native speakers of American English.

The first step of the Introductory Lesson was devoted to the introduction of theoretical knowledge about formulaic language. Much of the language people produce is formulaic; the rest has to be assembled in accordance with the grammatical pattern of the language. Our everyday communication is full of phrasal expressions and utterances because people like to stick to preferred ways of saying things. Such chunks make up a large proportion of language (spoken and written text). Studies (Wray, & Perkins 2002; Conklin, Kathy, & Schmitt 2007) put forward figures ranging between 37, 5 % and 80% of total words for different genres. By formulaic language we usually mean multi-word collocations which are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated *de novo* with each use. Collocations, fixed semantic units, frozen metaphors, phrasal verbs, speech formulas, idioms and situation-bound utterances can all be considered as examples of formulaic language (Howarth 1998; Wray 1999, 2002; Kecskes 2000). These word strings occurring together tend to convey holistic meanings that are either more than the sum of the individual parts, or else diverge significantly from a literal, or word-for-word meaning and operate as a single semantic unit (Gairns and Redman 1986, p. 35).

We included into the PP presentation the following issues: definition of formulaic frames, exemplification of various lexical items putting them on the Formulaic Continuum, designed by I. Kecskes (2007). The continuum illustrates that the more we move to the right on the functional continuum the wider the gap seems to become between compositional meaning and actual situational meaning.

Gramm. Units	Collocations	Fixed Sem. Units	Phrasal verbs	Speech formulas	Situation-bound utterances	Idioms
<i>be going to</i>	<i>Slightly (not mildly) different</i>	<i>As a matter of fact</i>	<i>put up with</i>	<i>You know</i>	<i>Help yourself</i>	<i>pull someone's leg</i>
<i>have to</i>	<i>strong tea but powerful computer</i>	<i>Suffice it to say</i>	<i>get along with</i>	<i>It's OK</i>	<i>Come on</i>	<i>In the long run</i>

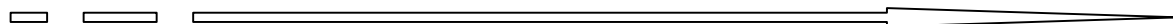


Fig. 1. Formulaic continuum on the basis of I. Kecskes's hypothesis

The difference between speech formulas and SBUs is that while SBUs are usually tied to particular speech situations, speech formulas can be used anywhere in the communication process where the speakers find them appropriate.

The second step was a practical part based on the activities for analyzing functional and compositional meaning of SBUs depending on the situation, trying out different types of formulaic language units in matching exercises. One exercise is of close-ended type, when a phrase from the left column is to be opposed with the most appropriate response from the right column. Both parts together give a two-replica dialogue, demonstrating typical conversational situations in which formulaic items are used in their most frequent meanings. For example:

I. Match each phrase in the left column with the most appropriate response:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. I'm sorry. | a. Fine, thanks. |
| 2. Thanks | b. It's OK |
| 3. How are you doing? | c. Nothing. |
| 4. What's up? | d. No problem, piece of cake. |
| 5. I had to wait four hours to see a doctor! | e. Oh, this and that. |
| 6. What were you and Mark talking about? | f. Talk to you later. |
| 7. Do you mind if I have a piece of cake? | g. Tell me about it! |
| 8. Can you tell me about it? | h. Help yourself. |
| 9. So long. (See you soon.) | i. No problem |

The next activity was a multi-choice exercise focusing on bringing more analysis of the situation, stimulating the users of the language think and comprehend the meaning of several formulaic utterances and the whole communicative situation. Some utterances in each assignment in the choice part correspond to typically Russian ways of verbal behavior in the situation. This reference to the learners' mother culture helped bringing cross-cultural issues of communication into focus. For example:

II. Choose the correct answer:

1. When someone sneezes, people around normally say: '_____'.
 - a. Be healthy
 - b. It's OK
 - c. Bless you
 - d. No problem

2. You are a shop assistant. You see a customer who needs your help. You say '_____'.
 - a. Welcome!
 - b. Can I help you?
 - c. What are you looking for?
 - d. Hi! How are you!

3. – Could you hand me that book, please? – Yes, sure. _____.
 - a. Take it!
 - b. Help yourself!
 - c. There you go!
 - d. You are welcome.

The last task was focused on sorting out various lexical items from the Formulaic Continuum into corresponding categories: grammar units, collocations, fixed semantic units, phrasal verbs, idioms, SBUs. It helped to practice identification of SBUs among other lexical items belonging to vocabulary of the English language expressing the idea in the native-like way. The subjects learned to pick up SBUs "which meaning can be explained only as functions of habitual usage" (Kecskes 2000, p.607). Kecskes (2000) claims that the use of situation-bound utterances is highly predetermined by the situation. That is why we designed the tasks based on the situation-based exposure.

A special Pre-experimental training task preceded the Experimental Part. The students were given 20 formulaic items including idioms (IDs), fixed expressions (FEs) and situation-bound utterances (SBUs), in the written form in micro situations. During this step the learners were introduced to some strategies for comprehension when dealing with language units in actual context. One strategy or support for discourse analysis referred with the learner's own culture and language, which we marked as CLO, standing for *closeness to native culture*. Another support for comprehension of the language unit was *compositionality of expression*, marked as COM. Still another strategy for comprehension was based on the analysis of *situational context* or SIT. The sample of the task is presented in the following examples:

		I.			II.	
	ID	FE	SBU	CLO	COM	SIT
As a matter of fact (1) , I do not know anything about this matter.		✓		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- May I use your pen? – Be my guest (2) .			✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do not know why Jack had to spill the beans (3) at the meeting yesterday.				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In the store: - Can I help you? (4)				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- Thanks, I am just looking (5) .				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To be frank (6) , I do not understand what James wanted with this letter.				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- Mom, I got into Harvard.				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- What!? Get out of here! (7)						

Fig.2. Sample pre-experimental training task

By this task subjects identified SBUs utilized in a minimal context (on the level of a sentence or a micro dialogue, including 2 replicas), which allowed for concentrating and directing more attention on the target lexical items. Though the utterances under focus belong to conversational language we presented them in a written form to give our learners more visual support for better perception, processing, and remembering them. The subjects were supposed to do two things:

- mark IDs, FEs and SBUs on the list;
- put CLO, COM or SIT after the SBUs to explain based on what they recognized the SBU. It should be pointed out that two or three supports are possible here rather than only one.

The Experimental stage aimed at checking the subjects' level of insight into the target topic. This was revealed by their comprehension of SBUs and interpretation of them in terms of guessing their meaning and the meaning of the whole situation. This stage was divided into the 2 steps. The students were exposed to listening to 10 SBUs recorded by native speakers. No actual situation context was given in this case. Each SBU was played twice. The subjects had to do two things: identify the meaning of SBU in writing (translate the meaning into Russian); using the appropriate mark (CLO, COM, SIT), explain what helped them identify the meaning of each SBU.

According to the 2-nd task, the students listened to 10 short dialogues, recorded twice by the native speakers, in which the same SBUs were used but put into an authentic context. The subjects were asked to translate the meaning of each SBU into Russian; explain in writing (using Russian or English) how they understood the situation as a whole, i.e. what was the conversation about, giving just short answers without going into much detail; using the appropriate mark (CLO, COM or SIT), explain what helped them identify the meaning of each SBU; in Russian give examples of SBUs which can be used in their own culture in similar situations (specifying how different it is from the close English equivalent, if possible).

2.4. Data collection and results presentation

Data for this study came from the Pre-experimental training task and Experimental part. The target words and phrases were types of word strings which characterize the preferred ways of saying things by native speakers of contemporary American English. These included idioms, fixed expressions, and situation-bound utterances. Table 1 illustrates the results of the learners' guesses when identifying different types of formulaic language at the Pre-experimental stage.

Table 1. Identification of various types of formulaic language

Formulaic Language items	Category	Number of guesses	
		Right	Wrong
Spill the beans	ID	13	2
Can I help you?	SBU	10	5
I am just looking	SBU	6	9
To be frank	FE	5	10
Get out of here!	SBU	9	6
You know	FE	10	5
Cup of tea	ID	4	11
Can I help you?	SBU	5	10
Don't mention it!	SBU	9	6
When pigs fly	ID	11	4
Be my guest	SBU	10	5
All of a sudden	FE	7	8
Welcome aboard	SBU	9	6
What can I do for you?	SBU	8	7
Come into mind	FE	8	7
In the long run	ID	4	11
How do you do?	SBU	6	9
Come on	SBU	1	14
Piece of cake!	SBU	9	6
So to speak	FE	9	6
<i>Total</i>		<i>153</i>	<i>147</i>

The pie chart shows the proportion of wrong answers in 3 main categories of lexical units.

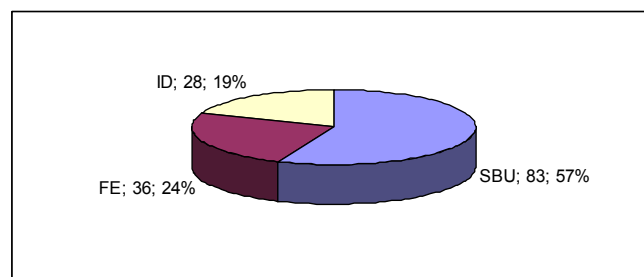


Fig.3. Negative identification results between 3 main categories of formulaic language

Table 2 presents data including results of interpretation and the types of strategies used by the participants for comprehension of each language item, when the exposure was done in a written form.

Table 2. Interpretation of American SBUs in the written context among other types of formulaic language

SBUs	Number of responses		CLO	COM	SIT
	Right	Wrong			
Can I help you?	10	5	4	3	6
I am just looking	6	9	1	1	4
Get out of here!	9	6	4	0	6
Can I help you?	5	10	1	3	1
Don't mention it!	9	6	2	1	6
Be my guest	10	5	2	3	5
Welcome aboard	9	6	4	2	5
What can I do for you?	8	7	3	1	4
How do you do?	6	9	2	2	3
Come on	1	14	0	0	1
Piece of cake!	9	6	3	2	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>47</i>

The next table presents results of interpretation by the participants of situation-bound utterances presented in recordings by American English native speakers.

Table 3. Interpretation of SBUs presented orally

SBUs offered for interpretation	Out of context		In context	
	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong
You bet	6	9	5	10
Here you go	2	13	11	4
Give me a break	0	15	8	7
Get out of here	11	4	6	9
Come again	6	9	6	9
Take a seat	15	0	15	0
How are you doing?	11	4	11	4
No problem	15	0	15	0
Be my guest	0	15	6	9
What's up?	14	1	13	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>55</i>

3. Discussion of results

We analyzed the students' written responses on the work-sheets and their in-class performance during the fulfillment of the tasks assigned to the Pre-Experimental training part and Experimental trial. The 2 groups of participants from the two faculties were not significantly different in terms of their EFL proficiency, and the study revealed that their knowledge of formulaic language and situation-bound utterances was almost the same. The participants demonstrated knowledge of some formulaic units typical of academic context and everyday use and the lack of familiarity with the units whose meaning is expressed figuratively and is highly dependent on the actual authentic socio-cultural situation.

The results show that acquisition of culture specific vocabulary units in the EFL teaching framework at the university level to non-linguistics majors is undermined at present. In-class observation and students' written responses give evidence that their knowledge and understanding of the lexical items such as idioms, fixed expressions, and SBUs is actually low. As the qualitative and quantitative findings of this case study underlined, even more proficient language users (having higher scores in the language test than 70) had problems in comprehension of situation-bound utterances. The number of wrong guesses in categorization of these language units and a high number of inadequate translations confirm that.

At the beginning of the Pre-experimental stage, during the in-class interaction and discussions practically all students used only one commonly adopted strategy of meaning comprehension based on word by word translation of the elements comprising the language unit, and consequently they draw wrong conclusions about the meaning of the utterance and that of the whole situation. Pre-experimental training tasks revealed that students were not familiar with conventional connotations of the majority of formulaic language items and that for them most salient meaning of the formula was its literal meaning.

During the preparatory step the learners were introduced to 3 more strategies for comprehension when dealing with language units in an actual context (CLO, COM, and SIT). They happened to be new for them, and it took some time and effort to learn applying them for conscious processing of input information. The results show that the majority of students rely simultaneously on 2 or 3 strategies. The figures 26 (CLO), 18 (COM), and 47 (SIT) speak that reference to their own culture was a bit stronger support for them than that of compositionality, and that contextual cue happened to be rather useful for them, as this strategy got 51% of participants' use.

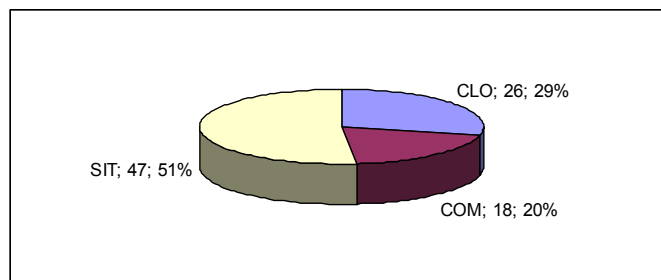


Fig.4. Subjects' comprehension strategies selection

Complementing the data coming from the sample translation into Russian with interpretation of the situation at the Experimental stage revealed that comprehension of situation-bound utterances presents major difficulty not only among other types of formulaic language units but also when context is missing. Among total wrong guesses in students' responses the majority (83 cases in comparison with 28 and 36 for idioms and fixed expressions correspondently) falls on SBUs. Table 3 allows comparing the results of interpretation of SBUs given as separate word strings and in the context. Based on this, we can say that there is a slight positive difference in the number of right interpretations of SBUs presented in the context (Change=19 %). Based on this, we can assume that, indeed, reliance on the context and the use of strategies to analyze the meaning of SBUs has positive impact on comprehension of the meaning of not only a lexical unit alone but also of the whole communicative situation in which it was employed.

This table also allows the researchers analyze which SBUs present most difficulty among others and think of the reasons for that. The following situation-bound utterances *You bet*, *Get out of here*, *Come again*, *Be my guest* got maximum mistakes in interpretation (9 and 10 wrong guesses out of 15). The easiest SBUs happened to be *No problem* (100% right guesses), *What's up?* (only 2 wrong guesses), *Here you go* and *How are you doing?* (4 students made a mistake). These numbers make us assume that the easiest group of SBUs for comprehension is made up by the units which the participants learned earlier in their EFL course, i.e. due to their prior knowledge. The utterance *No problem* caused no difficulty at all, because it correlates well with a similar phrase in Russian, possessing similar compositional structure and phonological expression, i.e. due to resemblance with the native language. The hardest for interpretation group of SBUs comprised those which contained familiar words but used in an unusual for the learners way characterized by the meaning rooted in the culture employed within the modern American speech community.

However, it seems us that the experimental study in combination of both parts contributed to the raise of awareness of culture-specific units by focusing the subjects' attention on authentic language samples and use as well as by applying 3 strategies for comprehension making use of thinking and analyzing various linguistic and contextual aspects, among which actual context playing a crucial role for intercultural communication effectiveness. The participants became aware of the existence of different types of formulaic language, learned to distinguish between them, and got personal experience in dealing with culture-specific language units and their authentic use.

The findings of the case study suggest that verbalization of thoughts by translation, interpretation and referring to one's own culture was found to be a helpful tool to understand how students process SUBs in their mother tongue.

4. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

This study demonstrates the importance of cross-cultural component in teaching EFL non-linguistics students, which can be introduced through formulaic language and culture-specific word strings. It is important for EFL non-linguistics students to understand the proper time and place for different formulaic sequences. The reason for the difficulties in understanding, translating and adequately interpreting SBUs is the lack of focus on these particular lexical items in the EFL classroom. Therefore, a teaching framework must address all types of formulaic language, paying special attention to situation-bound utterances since they constitute "utterances highly predetermined by the situation" (Kecskes 2000).

As the case study shows culture-specific lexical items are better understood when the learners recognize that some are grammatically patterned and others are semantically patterned. The hypothesis of Formulaic Continuum appears productive to assist EFL learners by showing the difference between speech formulas, situation-bound utterances and idioms. Students need to be made consciously aware of the ways the target language can be conveyed in native-like situations. As can be seen in the received evidence, EFL students have more to learn than just words; they should be exposed to the target culture and pragmatic value of culture-specific units. Answering the research question dealing with identification of the types of formulaic language carrying most socio-cultural difficulty for the learners we relied on the data which demonstrated that there is direct correlation between the categories CLO, COM and SIT and socio-cultural difficulty. This correlation can be specified in the following way: the higher the sociocultural difficulty is the more students rely first on actual situational context and then COM.

The way of remedying the lack of the reported knowledge and experience with culture-specific vocabulary is to introduce direct exposure through a specially organized learning environment. We suggest the following ways how to reach this goal. First, the teacher should introduce the topic of how people use language in the real world. Second, it is important to demonstrate authentic examples and analyze them based on 3 types of strategies, including using prior knowledge, referring to one's own culture, and processing information taking into account actual context. Sufficient and appropriate input as well as reflecting upon the use of the SBUs are integral parts of gaining higher level of language proficiency by non-linguistics university majors.

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This case study was carried out in the frames of research project under supervision of professor Dr. Kecskes (State University of New-York, USA) within the activity of Laboratory of Sociocultural Linguistics and Teaching Foreign Discourse (head professor Dr. S.K. Gural) at National Research Tomsk State University.

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